KEY INFORMATION FROM THE LITERATURE ABOUT BULLYING

A brief background
Bullying is widely regarded as a particularly destructive form of aggression with harmful physical, social and emotional outcomes for all involved (bullies, victims and bystanders). The research of the last 25 years confirms its widespread nature where it is particularly likely in groups from which the potential victim cannot escape, e.g. schools.

While bullying at school has long been recognised as existing in Australian literature, the empirical study of the problem really did not begin until 1989 – 90. We now hold clear evidence of the nature, extent and effects of bullying in Australian schools. The bulk of it is from studies conducted by Rigby and Slee.

The issue of conflict in schools was recognised with the publication of *Sticks and Stones* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Violence in Schools (1994). This influential report focused mainly on aggression and violence but also paid attention to the more specific problem of bullying. The inquiry concluded that while violence was not a major problem in Australian schools, bullying was. A recommendation of the inquiry was for the development of intervention programmes to reduce school bullying.

What is bullying?
There is no standard or universally accepted definition. However, some progress has been made toward a consensus regarding what elements should be included in an acceptable definition. Bullying is now regarded as a distinct form of aggressive behaviour, and not as aggressive behaviour in general (National Crime Prevention, 2002). The most frequently cited definition of bullying is the “repeated oppression, psychological or physical of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons” (Rigby, 1996). Three critical points are important in this definition:

- **Power.** Children who bully acquire their power through various means: physical size and strength; status within a peer group; and recruitment within the peer group so as to exclude others.

- **Frequency.** Bullying is not a random act; it is characterised by its repetitive nature. Because it is repetitive, the children who are bullied not only have to survive the humiliation of the attack itself but live in constant fear of its re-occurrence.

- **Intent to harm.** While not always fully conscious to the child who bullies, causing physical, psychological and emotional harm is a deliberate act (Morrison, forthcoming).

What is conceived as constituting bullying behaviour has expanded over the past few years. It had been conceived narrowly as involving physically threatening behaviour only. It is now generally seen as including verbal forms of aggression, as in the case of ridicule and name calling. More recently, it has become customary among researchers and educators to include indirect or ‘relational aggression’ as aspects of bullying behaviour – for example, deliberate exclusion or the spreading of destructive rumours.